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Place and voluntary activity in inter-war England: topophilia and professionalization

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<abstract>

ABSTRACT: During the inter-war period, the formation of amenity groups marked a new phase in the way place was conceived and shaped and their establishment and relationship with newly empowered local authorities remains an under-examined aspect of the management of towns and cities at the time. Focusing on the motivations for group formation in Birmingham and Norwich, we explore how complex relationships of attachment to place, or topophilia, entered into dialogue with professionalizing approaches to urban development and shed new light on attitudes to urban conservation and planning in the inter-war period. The article also adds a historical perspective to work on affective relationships with place.

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<A-head>Introduction

After the crisis of World War I, England entered a period of intense social and economic upheaval that transformed urban and rural landscapes alike. Those towns and cities only lightly touched by nineteenth-century industrialism suddenly faced rapid change as consumerism and motor vehicle ownership grew and the expanding state made renewed efforts to clear away substandard housing. For those towns and cities that had been hubs of change during the previous century, the same social and technological trends meant that transformation remained the dominant experience. As part of his 1934 classic *English Journey*, J.B. Priestley divided the country in three, as

summarized by John Baxendale: ‘the old England of “the cathedrals, the colleges and the Cotswolds”’; the nineteenth-century England of factories, terraced houses and sooty, dismal towns; and the “new England” of by-passes and filling stations, cinemas and bungalows, Woolworth's and cigarette coupons’.¹ In practice, towns and cities might be a combination of these Englands, but the experience of continued change was keenly felt everywhere. One outcome was a renewed impetus toward the formation of local groups concerned with the nature of place, particularly, but by no means exclusively, in historic settlements. Groups sought to protect ‘old England’, improve nineteenth-century England and manage ‘new England’.

In this article, we focus on two of these groups, from the cities of Birmingham and Norwich, formed and active during the inter-war period.² Whilst we give brief consideration to the achievements, strategies and tactics used by groups and their deployment of social and cultural capital, our principal concern is with their motivations and relationships with place. In particular, in thinking about motivations for group formation and civic activism, it is our hypothesis that this can be usefully viewed through the lens of ‘topophilia’, or love of place, as the individuals who coalesced to form groups had an acute affective sense of their city or town. A shared sense of place developed from personal attachments and, in acting as a collective, groups sought to constitute and stabilize particular notions of place identity for their respective cities as part of the process of influencing urban management and decision-making. Furthermore, we also show how such attachments entered into a direct dialogue with the professionalization of urban management during the inter-war period. Crucially, this dialogue was not external to the groups, but indicative of an increasingly professionalized associational culture in which expertise and attachment co-existed and were mutually reinforcing.

Building on this recognition, the article makes five principal contributions. First, while the practical activities of local civic groups have received some attention in academic work,³ and there has been a self-documentation by some societies,⁴ the ways in which such groups formulated and developed an account of place has been left largely unexamined. Second, by examining the attitudes of these two groups to heritage and development over the inter-war period, we shed light on how deep relationships of attachment – ‘topophilic’ love of place – entered into dialogue with professionalized approaches to urban management, securing a stronger potential to contribute to development through explicit use of professional status and expert methods. In other

words, topophilia was tempered by professional expertise. Third, following on from this, we demonstrate that in Birmingham and Norwich the municipality was not in a simple power relationship with the local voluntary association, overriding an effective attachment to place with a professionalized technical discourse; the reality was more complex and less straightforwardly vertical. Fourth, whilst there is a substantial body of work on the affective nature of place and place attachment,⁵ very little of this work uses archival work and we aim to encourage other researchers of place to use historical investigations and other urban historians to engage with wider literatures of place. Finally, more broadly, this article contributes to historical understandings of the development of conservation planning. Existing histories dealing with the first half of the twentieth century principally focus on broad trends at the national or international level, such as the development of principles of practice applied to monumental heritage or the political function of heritage in a time of seismic political shifts⁶ or on rural conservation and an associated, romanticized nostalgia.⁷ Our focus shows that a strongly emotional engagement with place was present in the urban context, remained consistent, or at least co-existent, with an increasingly professionalized field of activity and was manifested through the continuation of a highly active urban associational culture.

<A-head>Voluntarism, professionalization and understandings of urban place

Historical studies show a rapid growth of Britain's urban associational culture during the Victorian period and strong interconnections between the urban landscape, urban culture and voluntarism.⁸ Clarke argued that by the end of the eighteenth century 'not only did voluntary associations help to design the distinctive cultural face of a town, but within the community they gave rise to the special social networks...which served as the economic, political and cultural arteries of a particular urban world'.⁹ Given the closeness of associational culture and urbanity, it is not surprising that the urban landscape itself became a focus for voluntary action. From large-scale City Improvement Trusts, to campaigns for public parks and gardens, the desire to safeguard and improve the urban landscape was a preoccupation among voluntary groups from the outset and throughout the period of modern urbanization. In the early and mid-nineteenth century, for example, antiquarian, archaeological and historical societies

emerged in considerable numbers, their activities often focused upon attempts to systematize knowledge about a place's past or produce authoritative accounts of a particular locality.¹⁰

Historical studies of the urban landscape change focus with the formation of professional planning in the early twentieth century. In the two decades prior to World War I, many of the markers that signify the establishment of a profession were laid down. The subject's first journal, *Town Planning Review*, was founded alongside its first university department at Liverpool, major conferences were held and the first piece of legislation explicitly concerned with 'town planning' was passed.¹¹ This period has been viewed as one in which approaches to the management of the urban environment moved away from the voluntary and private sectors to be firmly established as a function of local government.¹² The early period is also viewed as transitional, one during which the influence of the voluntary sector dwindled as early planning professionals and local authorities moved centre ground in questions of urban place. The role of professionals and the local state in shaping urban place through planning and housing strategies expanded and cemented in the following inter-war period.

The result, then, is a body of historical research that has tended not to follow the progression of Britain's active urban associational culture from the nineteenth century into the twentieth century, but rather to replace a focus on voluntarism with one on professional and state activity. It is also a body of research which has engaged comparatively little with how ideas of place, sense of place and attachment to place were instrumental in group formation and construction and in their mobilization efforts.

Examinations of place and relationships with place arise from a number of different intellectual traditions, and multiple terms for arguably similar processes have been deployed within and across different fields of intellectual endeavour. Indeed, the concept of 'place' itself is complex and contentious. From a geographical tradition, Agnew defines place in terms of location (such as might be indicated by geographical co-ordinates), locale (the physical attributes of place) and sense of place (in shorthand, the meaning associated with place).¹³ Cresswell acknowledges this definition and adds materiality, meaning and practice.¹⁴ Places are continuously enacted and changed by daily practices, and experience is at the heart of place meaning. Much of the work that addresses 'sense of place' is underpinned by 1970s studies that are considered seminal within the humanistic geographical tradition. In particular, Tuan and Relph, drawing from Heidegger and ideas of dwelling, provided important early accounts.¹⁵ Tuan

coined the term 'topophilia', which he regarded as an affective tie with the material environment. He emphasized the emotional relationship between people and the places to which they are attached. In writing about the emotional relationship between people, individually or collectively, and place, Tuan argued that such a response might be aesthetic or stimulated by memory, but in either case is based on personal, subjective experience. Subsequently, the idea of sense of place has diffused into the literature and professional practice of architecture, planning and heritage conservation alongside the idea of 'genius loci', or the idea that places have a particular character or spirit of place.¹⁶ This is underpinned by the argument that the bonds people build with place often coalesce around distinctive architecture or historic features.¹⁷

However, the ideas about place developed by humanistic geographers in the 1970s were quickly problematized. The tendency of these early works towards essentialism and to focus on organic and bounded ideas of place was critiqued and the importance of power in constituting and reproducing place emphasized.¹⁸ It has been argued that topophilia and related concepts of place attachment have lost any positive traction and can be considered as 'backward, anti-modern and provincial'.¹⁹ However, as Massey acknowledged, 'the identity of places is very much bound up with the *histories* which are told of them, *how* those histories are told, and which history turns out to be dominant'.²⁰ And in practice, a substantial empirical literature on place-based relationships has developed, especially in environmental psychology. Within this body of work, the concept of 'place attachment', again complex and contested, is useful for the suggestion of an active connection that goes beyond sense of place. Scannell and Gifford argue that at an individual level, place attachment is dependent on the connections and experiences one has to a place, but at a group level, place attachment is comprised of shared symbolic meaning.²¹ Place attachment might be manifest in affective, cognitive or behavioural ways and result in behaviour in which attachment is expressed through actions. Furthermore, a strand of geographical work has developed that takes a more positive view of local engagement and attachment to place. One element of this is the idea of 'productive nostalgias' or 'mobile nostalgias'. Nostalgia is not conceived of as something that is fixed or passive, but as a dynamic process that develops in relation to human activity. Nostalgic memory can be mobilized to shape present and future social behaviours.²² Tomaney further makes the case for local attachments as a potentially progressive force.²³

Our focus in this article is upon place attachment, stimulated by a sense and love of place – topophilia – and the way such relationships to place underpinned action through the formation and activities of voluntary groups, entering into dialogue with the increasing professionalization of urban management that was occurring in parallel.

<A-head>Voluntarism and urban development in inter-war Birmingham and Norwich

In the early twentieth century, suburban expansion became an increasingly explicit part of the policy of the Birmingham City Corporation. The approach reflected long-standing local resistance to central clearance and tenement building, which had dominated housing programmes in cities like Glasgow and Liverpool.²⁴ Birmingham's early preference for outward expansion also reflected the association prevailing at the time that linked population spread and 'territorial aggrandisement'.²⁵ Immediately before World War I, with outlying areas such as Quinton and Harborne actively seeking incorporation within the city's boundaries, the Corporation negotiated sufficient support to see the Greater Birmingham Bill passed. Thus, in 1911, the City of Birmingham became an area three times the size of Glasgow, its biggest rival in the urban hierarchy.²⁶

The term 'town planning' was coined in Birmingham in 1905 and with the passing of the Town Planning, Housing, Etc., Act, 1909, the notion of planning and the accompanying legislative mechanisms provided both a framework and considerable impetus for local discussion. Birmingham quickly established itself as an exemplar of the new approach, with much interest among key members of the City's Council. George Cadbury Jnr, a liberal councillor and chairman of the City's Town Planning Committee and also a founding member of the Birmingham Civic Society, argued that

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A remarkable feature of the general movement towards Social Betterment is the increasing attention which is being given to the question of Town Planning. The day has gone past when the subject could be dismissed by being contemptuously described as an 'expensive fad', and men are beginning to realize that Town Planning may be advantageous to all classes of the community.²⁷

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Birmingham Corporation was among the first to put forward completed proposals for planning schemes to the Local Government Board and its schemes were among the first tranche to receive approval under the 1909 legislation. They were also by far the largest in the country.

At the start of the inter-war years, therefore, Birmingham exemplified the interest in and commitment to professional town planning that was characteristic of the period, but not put into practice in many places until later. It was also, as a result, on the brink of overseeing a substantial extension of its built landscape steered by a strong local authority. Yet there were other currents in the city that provide further insight into the ways in which urban transformation was viewed and received by residents.

The Birmingham Civic Society (BCS), founded in 1918, was established when the ambitious planning schemes were in their early stages of execution. The membership of the Society drew together various notable local figures, several of whom were professionally concerned with and/or politically committed to the early planning agenda. George Cadbury Jnr was the Society's first chairman, a position he held alongside his chairmanship of the Corporation's Town Planning Committee. Neville Chamberlain was also an active founding member, alderman, soon to be elected MP for the city, and, by the early 1920s, minister for housing. There were architects among the group, including its long-serving secretary William Haywood, Herbert Buckland and Charles E. Bateman. There were also artists, such as Arthur Gaskin and Joseph Southall. Buckland, Bateman, Gaskin and Southall were all closely associated with the Arts and Crafts Movement. These were among the most active individuals, but the society gathered a significant membership of 330 within just a few years.²⁸

Early discussions linked to the Society were consistent with the post-war optimism in planning as a positive and transformative project. For example, in Neville Chamberlain's introduction to *The development of Birmingham*, an ambitious scheme for the city written by the BCS's secretary William Haywood, Chamberlain expressed the conviction that the 'great changes' taking place in 'the new England' would cultivate the 'gentler and more human aspects of life' with planning – the 'new movement' – capable of remedying the 'limited vision of our predecessors'.²⁹ Such comments, coming from key figures in the Society, appear to align with a desire for change, rather than with a sustained attachment to the city's landscape as it existed at the time. However, when faced with particular planning schemes, the Society's

response was more ambiguous.

The new housing estates being built around the city raised a series of interconnected issues, including the provision of adequate transport infrastructure, sufficient educational facilities for residents in new areas and access to amenities like open spaces. It was voluntary activity, rather than the City, that made the most rapid response to these issues. For example, the Birmingham Council of Community Associations sought to remedy the lack of community facilities and the BCS attempted to work as a facilitator bringing together the voluntary groups in the city to support such work.³⁰ However, BCS was also the vehicle for a fund established for the specific purpose of buying land to be safeguarded as open space in the new housing areas. With a sense of urgency because of the widespread planning in process throughout the city's nascent conurbation, BCS bought tracts of land at Northfield (Daffodil Park) and Kings Norton (Playing Fields), later bequeathing them to the city on the condition they be protected. Gradually, while planning remained the subject, conservation increasingly appeared as the object of campaigns and initiatives.

The site at Kings Norton, for example, was chosen for purchase partly because the land 'sloped up the hill towards the old village and away from the City. The approach to King's Norton is thus kept open, and a fine view retained of the church and churchyard at the crown of the hill.'³¹ Further, less than a year after its formation, the Society, concerned about planning schemes that dealt only in numbers of houses, sought to collaborate with the City over plans for the village of Northfield. BCS produced both a report and an exemplar plan, the rationale being

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partly...to demonstrate the fact that, provided the question is kept in mind from the outset, all necessary developments can be effected not only without damage to the historical and natural features of an old village, but even in such a manner as to throw them into relief. Many charming old houses, farms and villages, and scenes of natural beauty have already been lost to our City, simply because no organized effort was made to save them.³²

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Thus, while the Society's founding members were sometimes very prominent advocates of planning, its approach to planning placed local heritage, the tangible legacies of the past and those remnants of the rural landscape that had survived as the conurbation had grown around them at the core of their account of what place should

be. In so doing, they sought to plot a delicate balance, reconciling a conservationist agenda within the framework of planned development and suggesting a strong sense of affection for the cityscape which they similarly sought to reconcile with their professionally framed engagement.

Furthermore, though the group continued to emphasize the potential of planning, its early policies also spoke forcefully of ‘vigilant opposition to all acts of vandalism and proposals injurious to civic amenities’ and the need to ‘stimulate civic pride’ by ‘urging the adoption of only the highest standards in architecture’.³³ When formalized, the Society’s aims were given as being ‘to stimulate historical interest in the city, and to this end to preserve all buildings and monuments of historical worth...to preserve all objects of beauty...to promote a sense of beauty and to stimulate civic pride...to work for a more beautiful city’.³⁴ By the late 1920s, the Civic Society was involved in a series of campaigns relating to individual buildings and sites and, in connection to these campaigns, the importance the group attached to a continued tangible relation to the past emerged clearly. For example, the expected demolition of Stratford House in 1929, following a three-year involvement of the Society in the campaign to save it, was characterized as the loss of ‘another link with the past’,³⁵ while seventeenth-century almshouses at Aston, under threat during the same years, ‘preserved much of the scanty contact with past conditions which it is manifestly our duty to preserve’.³⁶ The sense emerged, then, that planning could provide much in terms of convenience, but that the historic character of the city must remain to preserve and safeguard the character of the city, to serve as a focus and stimulus for civic pride, and to sustain a sense of continuity. Despite early support for the planning agenda pursued by the Corporation, the focus of BCS during the inter-war years suggests a growing sense of disenchantment with planned development as a realization of urban modernity, and is indicative of the value they attached to the cityscape and the affection they felt for it.

Norwich was one of the great mediaeval cities of England in both scale and wealth, founded, in part, on proto-industrialization through such industries as the weaving of wool. Whilst the city did not industrialize at the pace of northern cities in the nineteenth century, it did develop significant amounts of manufacturing, including engineering, brewing, food as well as financial services, with well-known companies such as Boulton and Paul, Colman’s and Norwich Union. A rich sense of bourgeois existence in pre-World War I Norwich is conveyed by R.H. Mottram³⁷ in the first

volume of his autobiography, *The Window Seat*, describing a city with a comfortable and well-networked bourgeoisie.³⁸ Mottram's second volume of autobiography, *Another Window Seat*, starts with his arrival back in the city, a return home to pick up life again after the interruption of World War I, 'We wanted 1914 back.'³⁹ However, it was quickly evident that the war had resulted in profound social change. One result of this was the beginning of a sustained push to improve housing conditions, through slum clearance and the construction of council housing on greenfield sites. This had some impetus from national government and growing support in Norwich, where Labour were steadily winning more seats on the Corporation, becoming the majority party by the end of the 1920s.⁴⁰

Thus, the Norwich to which Mottram returned was architecturally a fine historic city, with rich evidence of its prosperity throughout the centuries, but also a city with some of the legacies and problems of the industrial revolution, in particular poor-quality housing, often in historic yards, and a Corporation newly determined to address this issue as part of a modernizing mission. It was in this context that the Norwich Society (NS) was formed. The NS was initially a federation, created in a joint meeting of representatives of the Norfolk and Norwich Archaeological Society and the Norfolk and Norwich Association of Architects in March 1923. There seems to have been the purpose of creating a more active organization in intervening in city matters and to speak for the protection of the historic character of the city, whilst at the same time being ostensibly a 'progressive' organization, seeking the management of change rather than its prevention. The introduction to the Society's first annual report is worth quoting at length:

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It will be remembered that the Society was brought into being last year as a belated protest against acts of misguided zeal or wanton ignorance frequently recurring and having the effect of sweeping away many of the City's most precious characteristics. It was felt that the time had come when some public body should be formed which should give united and authoritative expression to the strong local feeling on the subject.

Matters were brought to a head by actual damage to the stonework of one of the most ancient of English bridges and immediate and successful steps were taken to ensure its future safety, by having it placed upon the Government

Schedule under H.M. Office of works. Mr Bushe-Fox, of that department, came down and delivered an address which contained many valuable suggestions. He pointed out that in many places of infinitely less historic interest than Norwich it had been found advisable to form a body of experts who were able to add practicable and constructive suggestions to any protests they might be forced to make, and, as the direct result of his visit the present Society came into being. Its president is a former Mayor. Eight members of the Norfolk and Norwich Archaeological Society and eight members of the Norfolk and Norwich Association of Architects form its council...We feel that there is a large body of public opinion which will support our aims and approve of such results, hereinafter enumerated, as have hitherto been obtained.⁴¹

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The modernization of Norwich was the primary stimulation for the formation of the Society. The NS found itself in conflict with the Corporation over a range of issues in the existing built up area. The policy arena in which these tensions were most evident throughout the period was housing. The two cases of most significance in the 1920s were the fate of Elm Hill and the slum clearance area around Oak Street. Elm Hill is a historic and picturesque street in Norwich. The Corporation had come to own much of the property on the north side, acquired to undertake works on the River Wensum to the rear of the properties. The Corporation properties were not well maintained and the NS fought for their retention (with the significant help of the national amenity body the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, SPAB) against Corporation officer indifference and resistance. Famously, the Society won, the improvement of Elm Hill becoming one of the first group conservation projects in the country.

Proposals for the clearance area at Oak Street came to the Corporation Ancient Buildings Committee in April 1928, with the committee delegating the NS to have a detailed look at the scheme. The response was a report presented to the November meeting. This concurred that improvement to the area was needed and that the Corporation should take full control of the area using the Housing and Town Planning Act 1925 or through private treaty. However, rather than comprehensive clearance, the report argued for a strategy of retaining some buildings for their historic importance, retaining and rehabilitating others as a cost-effective approach and for some limited

clearance. Arguments about Oak Street rumbled on for the next twelve months or so. A report of the Corporation's Health Committee in 1929 finally dismissed the NS's proposals as impracticable, with the only exception a mediaeval property individually purchased by the Norfolk Archaeological Trust. In the debates over Oak Street, the NS thus became portrayed by some within the Corporation as anti-slum clearance, a charge it was always at pains to deny.

It is evident that underpinning much of the motivation behind the formation of the NS and its subsequent activities was a deep topophilia for the city collectively held by its most active members, often expressed around its historic nature and the aesthetic qualities this was felt to imbue. These qualities were frequently described through comparison with places in England considered less favoured, or in relation to crisis; this was an inheritance that was being rapidly and irredeemably lost. This is a constant thread in the annual reports of the Society. So, for example, in the third annual report from 1926,

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wherever the weight of the society could be brought to bear it has been on the side of preservation of old features where they were beautiful, and with conviction that the trend of modern taste makes them a commercial asset. The flint walls and stepped gables of East Anglia must always make a distinctive appeal to the lover of architecture from whatever land he comes, while the setting of the Market Place and the massive Norman Keep above the roofs of the old streets must also attract the visitor and his wife who come for enjoyment of the prospect of ancient monuments illustrative of history which the great manufacturing centres of commerce cannot give them.

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In the 1930s, the language became ever more trenchant. For example, in the eleventh report (1934) the Society wants

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to prevent Norwich from sinking to the level of those modernised towns that are fit to live in, but in which no-one wants to live...As Norwich was not entirely or even largely built in the nineteenth century, it ought not to be pulled down in the twentieth, and its still solid and characteristic buildings

replaced by erections that might as well be anywhere and preferably should be nowhere.

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Thus, in the sixteen years of the Norwich Society, between its formation and its temporary cessation as a new war broke out, the core focus of the society remained unchanged. Essentially, it was preservationist in orientation but pragmatically accepted and adopted the enhanced role of the local state and the vestigial planning system. Whilst it seems always to have sought cordial relations with the Corporation, there was a sharpening of the rhetoric during the 1930s as lines of division were hardened. The developing influence of the Labour party on Norwich Corporation weakened the local networks of the NS, as their most powerful links were to the industrialists and professional classes in the city and the Corporation became increasingly determined to push through slum clearance projects.

<A-head>Discussion and conclusion

Over time, in both Norwich and Birmingham, the planning ideas of the amenity groups, particularly their active professional members, and those of the local authorities diverged. In Birmingham, such tensions were evident as early as 1919. Following a meeting between the Housing and Town Planning Committee of the City Corporation and a number BCS members, the society noted its concern that the committee ‘seemed to have the idea that the building of a house was a sort of manufacturing process; that an architect was not wanted at all’.⁴² There were conflicts of a similar kind between the NS and the Corporation. The management of the city with reference to a variety of technical standards and thresholds was a frequent source of discussion and sometimes dispute between the conservation-minded NS and the modernizing Corporation. The general point was made very clearly in a letter from Major Glendinning a leading figure in the NS to Powys, the secretary of the SPAB, ‘the Health Committee who in place of a brain have a set of printed regulations’.⁴³

The Norwich Society had a complex and at times fraught relationship with the Corporation, with which it had many personal and family connections. Whilst often at loggerheads with the policies and programmes pursued by Corporation officers, it was always careful to support the progressive objectives the Corporation was pursuing

(such as slum clearance) and give the Corporation due praise where it felt it could. So, for example, the NS was very supportive of the City's first Town Planning Scheme, which was concerned with the orderly expansion of the built up area.⁴⁴ From the outset the NS also sought to make connections beyond Norwich. The most significant relationship external to Norwich was with the SPAB, who were closely involved in a wide range of discussions on historic buildings in the city and with great significance and direct involvement in the case of Elm Hill, both for their expertise and their authority. At the heart of the NS's activities was a sense of what Norwich was and should be; a modernizing city but one which treasured its historical legacies for their archaeological and aesthetic qualities. This was an embedded cultural capital of taste but at the same time a pragmatic response to wider agendas in the city. For example, heritage could be sold, with the NS comparing the city's attractions to York and Chester. And the small group of the NS was always keen, on the one hand, to claim wider political legitimacy and, on the other, not to be seen to be interfering with the political legitimacy of others:

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The Council [of the NS] felt that the wide newspaper public, the immense public of those who listened to broadcast programmes, the individuals far afield who were now interested in the efforts to preserve some features, more especially of the traditional domestic architecture of Norwich, had become so because the society had pursued a forward policy. This was all to the good, for the classic criticism of the society had been based on the notion that the society desired to perpetuate darkness and dirt and congested traffic because they were supposed to be picturesque. The Council was anxious to remove these misconceptions. None of their members admired slums. They merely denied that every house which had not been kept in repair, the offices of which were not modern, or which is no longer required for the purpose for which it was built, constituted a slum.

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Like the NS, the BCS developed a complex relationship with the city's Corporation that was characterized by close social and familial links, as well as shared professional and political interests. This provided a reserve of social and cultural capital that was valuable to the Society. Much of the Birmingham Society's regular work was done through its Technical Committee, which adopted the role of external professional

expert reviewing City proposals. Further, from the minutes of BCS meetings during its early years it is clear that on the part of both the Society and the City Council there was willingness to co-operate on questions of mutual interest. Thus, a letter received in early 1919 from the acting chairman of the City's Housing and Town Planning Committee "intimated that the maps and plans of the future town planning schemes would be sent to the Society in order that the Technical Committee [of the BCS] should express opinions and make suggestions thereon" (Council Meeting, held March 31st, 1919). Writing about the work of the Society in 1923, its secretary described 'an honorary standing' as 'almost essential when seeking interviews with influential men in order to submit to them well-meant but unsought opinions' and indicated that 'an extensive technical knowledge is of vital importance'.⁴⁵ This privileged position for civic associations had been encouraged by early planners such as Patrick Abercrombie, who wrote in an introduction to the first review of the BCS's activity that the BCS was 'as representative of the citizens as...the Council. They, Council and Society, are complementary in function.'⁴⁶

World War I was a pivotal moment in the modernization of Britain. The state became more involved in the economy, social relationships changed and the political consequences of the privations of war meant that politically some steps had to be taken to improve the living conditions of the working class. The Housing and Town Planning Act 1919 began what Marian Bowley called 'the series of experiments in State intervention to increase the supply of working-class houses', which accepted the principle of state subsidies for housing and stimulated the nationwide growth of council housing, constructed at the density recommended by the Tudor Walters Committee in 1918 of not more than twelve houses to the acre.⁴⁷ At these new standards, development could generally take place only on virgin land on the periphery of towns, and municipal estates grew alongside the private suburbs for that part of the population enjoying rising living standards. This suburbanization was accelerated by rapid developments in road transportation and the extension of public transport systems. The proper planning of this suburban expansion, sympathetic to place, was the principal preoccupation of the BCS. At the same time, central areas that had only slowly changed over many decades were beginning to experience rapid and significant change. In response, local groups formed in some of England's most significant historic cities, including Stratford-upon-Avon, Oxford, Cambridge, Bath and, of course, Norwich. Thus, the formation of the NS, more than the BCS, was a paean to the 'old England',

under relentless pressure from the 'new England'. However, neither the NS nor BCS sought to deny change, but to control and mould it, reflecting an increasing nationwide enmeshment of preservation and planning.⁴⁸ While the aims of groups across the country were usually conservationist, the means of achieving them was generally through lobbying for more effective state legislation and planning controls as part of a vision of a modern ordered town and country.⁴⁹ They undertook, therefore, a complex dance between tradition and modernity. This closely resonates with Matless' concept of the planner-preservationist and the development and pursuit of a particular aesthetic associated with Englishness, combined with a wish for an ordered and controlled modernity.⁵⁰ The protection of heritage sustained beauty, but also transmitted values of an earlier era as models for the coming age. Order and control were needed to restrain the haphazard and sprawling developments engendered by an unrestricted free market.

Neither the Birmingham Civic Society nor the Norwich Society were ostensibly anti-modern; for public consumption at least there was no resistance to or questioning of the mandate and policy goals of the Corporation. Thus, place character was not considered fixed and immutable, but what was sought was a different kind of modernization process; a process that was less dictated by a set of ministry-formulated 'objective' standards and more by an understanding (and love of) place combined with a more imaginative approach to how progressive results could be achieved. The formation of such groups reflects wider shifts in professional identities and fields of expertise and approaches to the development of the urban landscape. As Hilton and colleagues have recently argued, the inter-war period was a crucial moment in the development of an increasingly professionalized voluntary sector in Britain.⁵¹ Over the course of the inter-war period, there were substantial changes, not so much in the way the groups attempted to operate, but as in the social and political landscape they were engaging with impacted on their position. In both Birmingham and Norwich, the tenor of the groups towards local governance shifted from a spirit of co-operation to an increasingly embattled tone. Changes in the context of their work related to significant shifts in governance with local authorities expanding and lessening social ties between local associations and local state as the period progresses. Furthermore, the professionalization and bureaucratization of the planning process, with relevant planning professionals in particular becoming increasingly associated with the state,

reduced the space for contributions or action by ‘amateurs’ by the mid-twentieth century.

It is evident that the citizens forming these societies were small in number and in possession of a particular form of cultural capital. In the terms set out by Bourdieu, cultural capital is objectified in buildings and works of art, and derives not just from possession of these objects, but in the capacity to appreciate and consume them – in taste – and is used to maintain social position and status.⁵² Thus, in Birmingham and Norwich a small group from each city’s professional elite responded to a self-constructed symbolic importance of place; the creation of ‘symbolic communities’, linked to particular representations of the past, considered to be under threat and used their professional expertise to strengthen their position with which to engage with their respective local authorities. In part, they were reacting to the physical manifestations of private development but equally critical to their mission in both cases was to influence other professionals and other elites, especially in terms of their respective Corporations. Ideas of place character were developed through both polemical *and* technical writing and in both cities there was, therefore, a shared group response built on a shared understanding of place by a small and self-selected group, imbued with a particular cultural capital, but not a dominant ideology. As such, though they were elite groups, these were not hegemonic discourses, but in effect powerful sub-altern discourses, seeking to influence decision-makers, often frustrated by other professionals working within standards-driven technical rationalities. They sought to create a ‘sense of place’ that foregrounded the particular history and physical qualities of place, drawing from their place attachment and topophilia. Embedded within each group, as their writings make clear, was also the personal experiences and memories of the individuals who made up the collective.

Whilst a grasp of technical rationalities helped in the process of engagement with local authorities, ultimately individuals and the groups they formed were motivated by an attachment to place, stimulated by a sense and love of place, or topophilia. Embodied within our use of the term is the idea, which was certainly prevalent in the groups we discuss, that places have an individual and distinct character. This closely related characterization is given by Foote and Azaryahu:

<extract>

sense of place means the logic and perception of place in connection with the qualities and attributes that distinguish a place from others, give it a sense of

authenticity, and induce feelings of attachment and belonging. Sense of place emphasizes the individuality of place in terms of unique personality or distinct character. It suggests a particular feel or a specific character that makes the place stand out among other places.⁵³

<\extract>

Topophilia was held individually but became group constituted and articulated as part of a struggle over the definition of value of place, as the forces of modernity heralded rapid and large-scale change. The attachment demonstrated by the Birmingham Civic Society and the Norwich Society linked affective topophilia with cognition and behaviour, and thus encompassed memories, beliefs, meaning and knowledge whilst also extending to the formation of groups and ongoing committed activity by members. The type of urban development that dominated the first half of the twentieth century challenged the identity of many towns and cities and, certainly, the motivations documented in the records of both the Norwich Society and the Birmingham Civic Society came from an affective place attachment that scaled across the city from individual buildings or sites to the city as a whole and indeed saw individual buildings as an integral part of what each city was. Place was, in these cases, a physical, bounded place, but with group formation it became something else, both in the social place of the group that was constructed but also in the way that the societies sought to campaign for a particular narrative of what physical place was and meant and that it needed to be protected from particular pressures for change. Whilst demonstrably an elite activity, it would be simplistic to characterize the activities of these groups as reactionary and, we would argue, their activities belong at least as much in the recent accounts of the progressive potential of local action.⁵⁴ The actions of the BCS and the NS in the 1920s and 1930s stand at a particular moment in time in the history of voluntary association engagement with the local state. Issues of place attachment, technical rationalities and local (and national) politics were played out through complex power relationships with a developing local state. With a contemporary agenda in Britain of a new emphasis upon localism underpinned by voluntary activity, enacted as both a political project and as a practical necessity with the evisceration of the local state under a cloak of austerity, these issues seem to acquire a new and powerful resonance.

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